DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 329 105 FL 019 015

AUTHOR Strauss-Sotiropoulos, Carol
TITLE Loosening the Leash on Writing: The Adult Language Learner.
PUB DATE Oct 89
NOTE 13p.; In: Fryer, Bruce T., Ed.; Medley, Frank W., Jr., Ed. Perspectives and Horizons. Dimension: Languages 89. Report of Southern Conference on Language Teaching.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; *Adult Students; *Andragogy; Classroom Techniques; Educational Strategies; German; Introductory Courses; Second Language Instruction; *Student Motivation; *Writing Instruction; Writing Processes

ABSTRACT

Through classroom observation and examination of literature on adult learning, second language teachers can learn to adapt teaching styles to adult needs. Research on maturation suggests that in course planning and teaching, adults should be included in formulating learning objectives and designing learning experiences, taught to exploit their own experiences as resources for learning, and helped to apply new learning to their experiences. When adult language learners indicate writing as a goal, teachers should accommodate them. Modeling strategies used in English writing workshops can establish a conducive climate to help minimize linguistic problems. Pre-writing techniques such as list-making and oral brainstorming are appropriate for beginning second language learning. After the initial period of invention, focus turns to correction and revision. In-class writing tasks with the teacher providing brief, spontaneous conferences provide individualized and immediate feedback. The technique of focus correction encourages the instructor to focus on specific writing problems rather than noting all errors in a written piece. In addition, instruction should deemphasize processing of large amounts of new information and emphasize tasks requiring integration, interpretation, and application of knowledge. In their eagerness to express themselves and gain mastery, adult learners challenge themselves to promote effective experiences. A 32-item bibliography is included. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED329105

LOOSENING THE LEASH ON WRITING: THE ADULT LANGUAGE LEARNER

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
M. Gartman
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Carol Strauss-Sotiropoulos

INTRODUCTION

As the goals of foreign language teaching and learning place greater emphasis on using the language for real communication, it becomes increasingly important to "loosen the leash" on beginning level writing tasks commonly included in FL methodology texts and articles. Most experienced teachers can provide numerous (and humorous) examples resulting from the attempts of beginning students to express themselves in writing. The abundance of errors produced by these novice FL learners often leads us to the conclusion that one should permit students to write only what they can already speak and even then only in carefully controlled patterns (Pincas, 1962; Rivers, 1968). The question at the heart of this discussion is whether or not under certain conditions there is cause or compensating reasons that would justify entry into writing, and, if so, how should these initial writing tasks be structured.

The decision by this writer to loosen the leash developed in an attempt to sustain student motivation in adult education German classes by applying findings from recent research in both adult education theory and writing workshop strategies. Annually over a ten year period groups of students ranging in age from 23 to 80 have responded to this instructor's query about their goals for the course, and have emphasized that they want to learn to speak and understand. In addition, many express strong desires to write on a variety of topics and in paragraph length discourse. Rarely do we encounter such clearly stated and largely unsolicited requests in classes of pre-adults and adolescents: Troyanovich (31) must have had the latter in mind when writing, "most second-language students have neither the psychological nor the practical need to learn to write the foreign language." (p. 435) In fact, adult learners tend to have different reasons for

FL019015

studying another language, as well as different learning strategies. Through an examination of the literature on adult learning orientations as well as through our own observations we can learn to adapt our teaching style to respond to these adult needs.

TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF ADULT LEARNERS

The precepts of andragogical theory (the study of teaching to adults) introduced by Knowles (1970) in the early seventies, have been undergoing debate, refining and field-testing since that time. (Conti, 1985; Davenport, 1987; Even, 1987; Galbraith, 1989; Podeschi, 1987). Pedagogy, the term we traditionally use to refer to the science of teaching, is oriented specifically toward theories of how children learn and has resulted in methodologies of how all learners, children and adults alike, should be taught. The works of Knowles and others, based on findings that adults learn differently, suggest persuasively that teachers of adults must rethink the methods and strategies used with these more mature individuals. Andragogical concerns, steeped in studies of adult psychology, rely on models of adult maturational and developmental theory. Knowles synthesizes the research and presents several characteristics of adult learners' maturational progression.

1. Their self-concept moves from one of being dependent toward one of being self-directing.
2. They accumulate a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning.
3. Their time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application. Accordingly, their orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of problem-centeredness.

Corresponding implications for course planning and teaching method would demand of instructors of adults that they:

1. Include adult students in a mutual process of formulating learning objectives and in the designing of learning experiences;
2. Help students exploit their own experiences as resources for learning so that the learning process is related to and makes use of their knowledge;
3. Help students apply new learning to their experience.

Equipped with an understanding of these basic concepts of adult psychology, the FL instructor is more likely to be better able to cope with the challenges encountered in the beginning FL class.

First, beginning adult FL learners face the potential problem of infantilization. Our students are at the distinct risk of sounding--or at the least of fearing they will sound-like toddlers. Most teachers have ways of trying to compensate for this implicit handicap. For adult learners, the problem is intensified. As described by Levinson (1976), the drive to achieve the ego ideal--our picture of how we should be at our ideal best--is the most powerful motivating factor in adults. A critical element in the adult personality is the desire to see the self as competent and effective in doing well what one does. In contrast to children--dependent beings for whom education is a process of accumulating a reservoir of knowledge and skills to be used later in life--adults view themselves as producers, doers, managers of their own lives. Thus education involves immediacy of application toward problem solving (Knowles, 1970, p. 48). Furthermore, because adults define themselves by their experience, they have a deep investment in the experience itself. If put in a situation in which their experience is not being used, or its worth is minimized, adults feel rejected as persons.

Application of these concepts in the classroom necessitates providing adults with ways to apply new ideas to their experiences, to apply new skills and knowledge immediately, and to manage their learning in the collaborative mode whereby "authority for curriculum formation is jointly shared by the learner and the practitioner" (Conti, 1985, p. 7). Not to provide for these special needs of adults, not to adapt to adult learning orientations, is to intensify the infantilization already inherent in the language taught in the beginning FL classes and thereby to increase anxiety and frustration.

THE CASE FOR WRITING

One readily available means by which adults can apply language skills and knowledge and gain a sense of mastery over application of subject matter is to do with it what they have done experientially with the native language--listen, speak, read, and also write. When adult learners indicate that developing skill in writing is a goal or a desired component of the course, the instructor will want to be able to accommodate the learner

confidently and in good conscience. If teachers fail to understand and acknowledge the extent to which adults must be treated as adults, the consequences are often resentment and withdrawal from continued learning. Unfortunately, the traditional education model has too often failed to help adults achieve their ego ideals and thereby has discouraged motivation to learn (Levinson, 1976). Although many variables may play a role in the high numbers of students who do not continue in the study of a foreign language after the first year, course design and response to student learning objectives is most certainly an important factor.

Once the decision is made to accommodate those adults for whOM learning to write in the second language is a goal, teachers need to become versed in the most productive means of facilitating that goal. Modeling strategies used in English writing workshops can serve to establish a climate conducive to writing and can provide techniques for minimizing the likelihood of our students incorporating so many linguistic monstrosities into their creative writing projects.

GETTING STARTED

Some of the pre-writing invention techniques used in writing workshops lend themselves naturally to the beginning FL classroom, notably list-making and oral brainstorming. A number of excellent works and articles have appeared recently which advocate and describe these techniques (Collins, 1985; Colman, 1977; Cooper, 1988; Guadiani, 1981; Hewins, 1986; McGrath, 1988; Peterson, 1985; Spack, 1984). Since these techniques are designed for in-class use, they work particularly well in the FL classroom, strengthening the facilitative and corrective role of the instructor. It should be noted that in the adult classroom these techniques serve more to help structure ideas and to reinforce and expand vocabulary than to motivate students toward arriving at or developing content ideas on a topic. Adults who are already rather highly motivated have a clearly recognized experience bank on which to draw, and view their writing as solving the problem of how to express thoughts efficiently and correctly in the FL. Quickly engaged in putting pen to paper, they pose the challenge to the instructor of how to facilitate most effectively the correct expression of ideas.

CONFERENCING

Beyond the stage of invention, correction and revision become the focus for beginning adult FL learners. In-class writing tasks and assignments free the instructor to circulate around the room, skim over students' work in progress and ask questions. The questions asked in writing workshops for native speakers typically relate to points that need to be clarified, the need for support of an idea, or for restructuring or transitioning. Circulating time in the beginning FL classroom is devoted to much more concrete issues. Our interest here lies not with the perfectly structured, unified and substantiated essay, but rather with ways to engage students in re-composing ideas that have resulted in poor self-expression or non-communication. With the assistance of the teacher, students can become more adept at unraveling thoughts embedded in an English-induced construction and rephrasing those thoughts using the grammatical structures and discourse markers that they already control or that they are learning to use. Just what do we do when we encounter a sentence such as, "Ich fahre nach Worcester fur Schule"? By pointing out to the students that the phrase is unacceptable in German and asking them to draw out the thought to express as concretely as possible the meaning intended, they will usually arrive at an appropriate construction, as this student did in "Ich fahre nach Worcester, wo die Uni ist."

As Krashen (1984) points out research suggests that feedback is most useful when given during the writing process rather than upon completion. Moreover, the involvement of the instructor during the composing process allows for a high degree of individualization. This takes place in short, spontaneous "conferences" between teacher and student. Meeting individual needs is by far one of the most appealing features of conferencing. The individualized moment allows the one student to benefit from a brief drill or alternative explanation of a concept already covered but evidently not understood or integrated, while it might provide the more linguistically adept student the opportunity to learn a new grammatical construct or, at the least, to be referred to the textbook explanation, thereby accelerating language acquisition and proficiency. How we approach the problem in "Es ist eine Woche seit bin ich hier gewesen," whether in conferencing or in written correction (see focus correction below) depends both on material covered to date and on the

individual's ability. In this particular case (two months into the year) adverbial clauses had not yet been introduced. The more adept student can be shown that "since" as a subordinating conjunction ("seitdem") differs in German from "since" ("seit") as a preposition. The student can then be referred to the explanation of subordination in the test. Or, one might say simply that "seit" as a preposition can be used before an object of time to express duration, as in "seit einer Woche" and that in German such a time expression that continues into the present is used with the present tense, resulting in "Seit einer Woche bin ich hier." To the less able student, one might point out that the construction is improper, that we haven't yet learned an appropriate alternative, that we will soon come to it, but that for the time being we shall leave the sentence as is. Heresy? Revolutionary? Not if we adhere carefully to certain guidelines.

FOCUS CORRECTION

Now that we have students writing and the instructor intervening we find ourselves right back at the long-espoused interdiction against encouraging beginning FL students to write: the preponderance of errors and what to do about them all. The danger, as expressed by Lalande (1982) is that "unless all errors are identified, the faulty linguistic structures, rather than the correct ones, may become ingrained in the student's interlanguage system." (p. 140) Whether this reasoning is sound or specious is an open question and the subject of lively debate. If sound, then the writing of beginning FL students of necessity will be covered by the blood-red ink of countless corrections, and hours, instead of minutes, of conferencing time will be demanded, thereby rendering any writing project at the very least unmotivating, and most likely unfeasible. But without those multitudinous corrections do we run the risk of unwittingly promoting faulty linguistic articulation which will result in bad habits permanently imprinted on the student's brain?

The technique known as focus correction, advanced by Collins (1985b) and used extensively in native language writing classes, has demonstrated otherwise, with both young writers and old. A focus correction system encourages the instructor to focus on specific writing problems rather than to note everything that is wrong in a written piece. In this selective approach to correction, the instructor provides specific information about the criteria being

used to evaluate, and indicates clearly that only certain types of errors will be corrected.

In the beginning FL class these would be grammatical concepts and vocabulary covered to that point. Essential at the outset is clarification by the instructor and firm understanding on the part of students that there may be additional errors, but that they will be overlooked in the interest of concentrating on a few issues at one time. From a practical point of view, focus correction is less time-consuming and is truly the critical factor that enables the teacher to promote development of writing in beginning FL classes without undermining student motivation and learning. As Collins (1985a) puts it, focus correction provides for less teacher effort while producing more student learning.

Focus correction is generally more a problem of adjustment for the instructor than the student. As described by Murray (1968), a pioneer in the process writing movement.

> Not correcting papers may be the hardest thing for a writing teacher to do. The errors are there and so is the virtuous feeling of a job well done as the mistakes are speared on the page. The more mistakes, the more satisfaction . . . . The teacher may have as much trouble not correcting papers as a drunk not taking a drink. It's so easy to slash through a student's paper, so fulfilling, so much fun. It does fine things for the teacher, but little for the student. Successful implementation of this strategy for handling students' written work can be effected only when we become truly learner-oriented and acknowledge that correcting every error is not the key to enhanced student learning.

An interesting analogy to the issue of what we might call "invented L2 grammar by way of L1" may be drawn to "invented spelling," a component of the whole language movement wherein young children who are just beginning to associate sounds with letters are encouraged to write. Ex., "I was sc yastr day and I cat na cm tow scow," trans. "I was sick yesterday and could not come to school" (Newman, 1984). Early childhood educator Wood (1982) addresses a familiar-sounding question raised over the advisability of encouraging invented spelling: will it interfere with learning to read and write in standard spelling? She responds, "As inventive spellers engage in experiences with standard print . . . their concept of orthography is gradually modified . . . . The learning pattern that characterizes language acquisition, as well as concept attainment in general, is

evidenced. Gradually the learner modifies rules to incorporate new experiences." (p. 707) Over time FL learners similarly integrate and apply new concepts. Errors resulting at one stage from lack of knowledge are gradually replaced by correct and appropriate expression as new concepts are learned. Documenting students' progress by having each student keep all written work in a folder for longitudinal overview confirms the validity of focus correction and alleviates concern over the development of bad habits.

ADULT LEARNING, WRITING AND VOCABULARY ACQUISITION

An additional advantage to facilitating writing skills of adult students is the increase in the amount of vocabulary they control. Cross (7), a leader in the field of adult learning, notes that tasks requiring quick insight, short-term memorization and complex interactions are best undertaken when young. As people get older, they accumulate knowledge and develop perspective and experience in the use and application of that knowledge. According to Cross, in order for a model to capitalize on the learning strengths of adults, it should deemphasize the processing of large amounts of new information emphasize the development of those tasks that require integration, interpretation, and application of knowledge. Rather than memorizing long lists of vocabulary, a discouraging experience for many adults, new terms can be more smoothly incorporated experientially with the personalized writing context providing the framework. For those students who wish to use a dictionary, the usual caveats are expounded. Students should obtain a multi-entry hardback edition. They should be taught to reduce an expression to the most concrete terms possible, and then to counter-reference the FL equivalent in order to confirm the preliminary decision. The conferencing and focus correction strategies also serve to minimize many of the pitfalls associated with dictionary use. Most importantly, adults need to be permitted to follow a self-determined course of action, whenever possible. Use of the dictionary is but one example of a student-centered activity through which the instructor can help language learning become more independent in their self-expression.

CONCLUSION

In their eagerness to express themselves accurately in writing and to gain a sense of mastery over subject matter by applying new knowledge to old experience, adult FL learners challenge themselves to promote effective in-class experiences. Involvement in the writing process demonstrates vividly that there is no "get-language-quick" scheme to be had. But, once vested in such a highly personalized and individualized endeavor, adults respond positively to the realization that language learning is a continuous process with few neatly packaged endings or beginnings. By accommodating adult learning orientations, by allowing students a voice in course planning and objectives, and by creatively confronting the risks associated with early introduction of writing, we create an environment within which adults can realize their own goals and develop a sense of mastery essential to continued interest in FL learning.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Brière, Eugène J. "Quantity before Quality in Second Language Composition." Language Learning 16 (1967): 141-51.

Collins, John. Cumulative Writing Folder, Teacher's Guide. Andover, MA: The Network, Inc., 1985a.

_____. The Effective Writing Teacher: Eighteen Strategies. Andover, MA: The Network, Inc., 1985b.

Colman, Lee. "Is There a Magic Formula for Teaching Original Composition in French?" The French Review 50 (1977): 412-16.

Conti, Gary J. "Assessing Teaching Style in Adult Education: How and Why." Lifelong Learning 8, (1985): 7-11, 28.

Cooper, Tom. "Writing as Process or Back to Nature," 41-50 in T. Bruce Fryer and Frank W. Medley, Jr., eds., Language in Action: Theory and Practice, Report of Southern Conference on Language Teaching, Dimensions: Languages '88. Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina, 1988.

Cross, K. Patricia. Adults as Learners. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1981.

Davenport, Joseph. "Is There Any Way Out of the Andragogy Morass?" Lifelong Learning 11, (1987): 17-20.

Dawe, Charles W., and Edward A. Dornan. One to One: Resources for Conference- Centered Writing, Instructor's Manual. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1981.

Even, Mary Jane. "Why Adults Learn in Different Ways." Lifelong Learning 10, viii(1987): 22-25, 28.

Galbraith, Michael W. "Essential Skills for the Facilitator of Adult Learning." Lifelong Learning 12, (1989): 10-13.
Gaudiani, Claire. Teaching Writing in the Foreign Language Practice No. 43. Washington, D.C., 1981. (EDRS: ED 209 961).

Heileman, Laura K., and Isabelle Kaplan. "Proficiency in Practice: The Foreign Language Curriculum," 55-78 in Charles J. James, etc., Foreign Language Proficiency in the Classroom and Beyond, ACTFL Foreign Language Education Series. Skokie, Ill: National Textbook Company, 1985.

Hewins, Catherine P. "Writing in a Foreign Language: Motivation and the Process Approach." Foreign Language Annals 19 (1986): 219-24.

Knowles, Malcolm S. The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy versus Pedagogy. New York: Association Press, 1970.

Krashen, Stephen P. Writing: Research, Theory and

Application. Oxford: Pergamon, 1984.

Lalande, John F. "Reducing Composition Errors: An Experiment." Modern Language Journal 66(1982): 140-50.

Levinson, Harry, Psychological Man. Cambridge, MA: The Levinson Institute, 1976.

Magnan, Sally Sieloff. "Teaching and Testing Proficiency in Writing: Skills to Transcend the Second-Language Classroom," 109-36 in Alice C. Omaggio, ed., Proficiency, Curriculum, Articulation: The Ties That Bind, Northeast Conference Report. Middlebury, VT: Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1985.

McGrath, Douglas. "Early Foreign Language Composition," 51-65 in T. Bruce Fryer and Frank W. Medley, Jr., eds., Language in Action: Theory and Practice, Report of the Southern Conference on Language Teaching. Dimensions: Languages '88. Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina, 1988.

Murray, Donald M. "The Listening Eye: Reflections on the Writing Conference." College English 41,i(1979): 13-18.

_____. Writer Teaches Writing. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968.

Newman, Judith. The Craft of Children's Writing. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1984.

Peterson, Deborah. "Writing to Learn German," 47-59 in Ann Ruggles Gere, ed., Roots in the Sawdust: Writing to Learn across the Curriculum. Urbana, Ill: National Council of Teachers of English, 1985.

Pincas, Anita. "Structural Linguistics and Systematic Composition Teaching to Students of English as a Foreign Language." Language Learning 12(1962): 185-95.

Podeschi, Ronald L. "Adragogy: Proofs or Premises?" Lifelong Learning 11, (1987): 14-16, 20.

Raimes, Ann. "What Unskilled ESL Students Do as They Write: A Classroom Study of Composing." TESOL Quarterly 19(1985): 229-54.

Rehorick, Sally. "Second Language Acquisition in Adults: Some Methodological Implications for the University Educator." The French Review 56(1983): 821-28.

Rivers, Wilga. Teaching Foreign Language Skills. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1968.

Spack, Ruth. "Invention Strategies and the ESL College Composition Student." TESOL Quarterly 18(1984): 649-65.

Troyanovich, John M. "How Defensible is Writing as an Objective in Short-Term Foreign Language Experiences?" Foreign Language Annals 7(1974): 435-42.

Wood, Margo. "Invented Spelling." Language Arts 59(1982): 707-17.

Zamel, Vivian. "Responding to Student Writing." TESOL Quarterly 19(1985): 79-97.